



Father and Son

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AN hour's ride on horseback from Galatz, in the marshes within the open angle formed by the Danube and the Pruth, there lived a tribe of wild Magyars. Generations ago they took possession of the marshes of the Rumanian valley, prospered, multiplied, and kept themselves within the confines of their own domain. The place became known as "Vadu Ungurului," the Hungarian Valley, and no man or woman from any of the surrounding villages or towns ever ventured near those marshes; for it was known that the "Ungurs" were a band of cutthroats, thieves, smugglers, and as ill tempered as the wild boars that roamed in the marshes they occupied. The mayor of their village was always one of their own. They paid no taxes, cared for no laws other than their own, and lived as they pleased.

When it happened that a stranger passed through their domain, he was as likely to disappear from the face of the earth as if he had ventured into a region infested by wolves. The earth swallowed him, just for the clothes on his back, or as a reprisal for what the outside world had recently done to a member of the Vadu Ungurului clan. For when a man from the Vadu Ungurului was seen outside his domain, he was also a proper target for any sort of weapon that changed his

position from vertical to horizontal.

The arm of the law was never called to show its strength in such an affair. The lawlessness of the Hungarian Valley caused the surrounding villages to become as lawless, and that same spirit spread across the Danube and the Pruth. It was kill or be killed.

From time to time a silent truce was established between the Vadu and the rest of the world. It lasted six months, a year at the utmost; then suddenly some one was found lifeless. The father or son compensated himself by shooting an Ungur. A farm went up in flames in the middle of the night, which was generally followed by a raid on the general store, the school, and the church. As the Hungarians were Catholics, and the inhabitants of the neighboring villages Greek Orthodox, neither considered it sacrilege to desecrate or rob the church of the other party. When a certain balance of shed blood had again been established between the opposite factions, the truce entered into force again, until disturbed anew by some murder, rape, or robbery. It was the world against the Hungarian Valley.

Over the people of Vadu Ungurului once ruled a man by the name of Janosh Bart. At sixty Janosh was as straight as an arrow, and he was broad and powerful. His gray hair hung

loose over his shoulders, his long, silver-white mustache curled down over his chin, Mongolian fashion, when Janosh was in a good mood; but it was waxed and stiffened to stand away in a straight line, like a rope across his face, when Janosh was on the war-path.

There was a saying among his own people that when it came to words Janosh spoke only with his knife. He ruled them with an iron hand, for the people were wild and bloodthirsty and would have liked nothing better, when drunk or happy, than knifing one another and letting everything go up in flames.

The Ungurs bred horses, raised pigs, and cultivated corn. The women were the best turkey-raisers in the country. A turkey fattened in Vadu Ungurului was a prize bird. The commerce outside the village was conducted only by the women, big, blond, buxom creatures, who dressed in gaily colored skirts and wore riding-boots, and were capable of holding their own in a bargain with the shrewdest Gipsy and the craftiest Tatar.

Janosh's son, Matheas, as big and broad as his father, was the only man who did not willingly submit to the chief's rule. He did as he was bidden, but sullenly, impatient for the day when he should be the ruler. Not that he disagreed with his father's method. If anything, it was not harsh enough according to his judgment.

There was no great wisdom in Janosh's rule. It was steal and conceal. It was he who gave orders when and how to set fire to a farm, when to make a night raid on some neighbor's granary after the harvest, or which cow should be dragged from the pasture-land of

a Rumanian peasant. For all other things the men were more or less free to act as they pleased, within the bounds of a few rude rules and the injunction against the use of knife or lead on people of their own tribe. That was the chief's own privilege.

At forty Matheas, fiery, savage, sullen, was chafing under the restraint

of these few rules. From early childhood he had been told that he was to become the ruler of his people, but that father of his lived too long. Matheas longed to be able to give orders, to shout them aloud, to punish those who did not follow his commands. And so eager was he to take the reins in hand that he had prayed daily, from his fifteenth year on, for the death of his father, the death of Janosh Bart. But Janosh was as hewn out of rock. There seemed to be no bullet made that could make more than a slight abrasion on his powerful body, and he was as immune to disease as a living, moving rock could be.

When Matheas was twenty he had seen his father fight barehanded against six peasants armed with knives and axes. There were six funerals the fol-



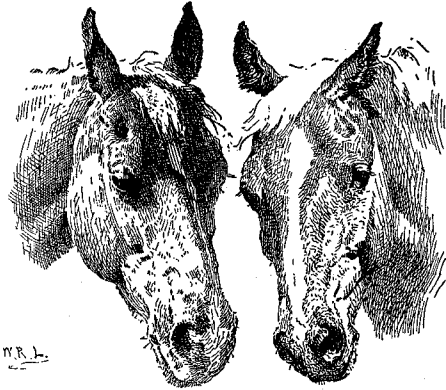
lowing day in the adjoining village. At fifty old Janosh amused himself throwing an ox by twisting the animal's head, and no woman was safe in the old man's neighborhood. He would throw her across his shoulder as if she were a little lamb, and carry her away. Nobody dared interfere with Janosh's pleasures any more than with his commands. He was absolute.

Matheas's main occupation was the training of horses. Fishing, planting, herding, were occupations too tame for him; only in the taming of horses did he find an outlet for his tremendous store of energy. Like his father and all the others of the tribe, Matheas married before he was twenty. The first-born was a son; Luca he named him. The half-dozen children following were girls, so they did not count. From early morning to nightfall Matheas was with his horses. He had a stable apart from his father's, and his steeds grazed in a field fenced off from the one in which his father's horses pranced.

§ 2

Janosh Bart soon realized that his son, by devoting all his time to his horses, owned animals of finer grain and cleaner limb than his own stable possessed. It worried Janosh Bart. As the chief he had to be the strongest physically, the best shot, the best swimmer, the best runner. His pigs had to be the most numerous. And if the question was quality of horse-

flesh, he could not afford to let supremacy pass into anybody else's hands, not even his son's. A ruler had to rule, to lead.



So Janosh began to devote more of his time to his horses. When the snow was deep enough, he harnessed three of the best to a light sleigh, and gave them a run just to warm them up. The whole tribe assembled to watch the trial.

Like a streak of brown on a white background, the sleigh passed before the eyes of the people, once, twice, thrice. They marveled at the spirit and the speed of their chief's horses. What a man! What a man, Janosh Bart! But hardly had Janosh's horses been stabled when Matheas appeared in front of the inn with his troika of black horses. He gave them their heads at once. Their legs moved with the regularity of clockwork, and an hour afterward they were as eager to run as if they had just started. Yet there was no telling whose horses were faster, the father's or the son's. And even if some of the people had opinions on the subject, they dared not express what they thought for fear of the old man's knife or Matheas's unerring bullet. It was Matheas's boast that he had never sent a bullet that had not found its mark. The tribe was about evenly divided between father and son, but no one dared breathe a word or commit oneself to an opinion. In the course of the following week they began to mistrust one another

so strongly that they never mentioned the event.

The following Sunday Janosh Bart, on horseback, ordered the inn to be closed and everybody to assemble before his door.

All did as they were bidden, and stood silent for hours with their wives and children in the snow. Suddenly the voice of Matheas, who also waited outside, was heard.

"*Teremtete!*" he thundered. He knocked at the door of his father's house. "How long are we to stay outside in the snow, Janosh Bart?" he asked.

"Until I will it differently," the old man replied, and closed the door without saying another word.

It was midnight before the chief dismissed his people after passing them in review one by one. There was a longer look between father and son



than between the chief and any of the other people.

A Sunday later, early in the morning, the chief's son appeared first at the inn with his trio of black horses harnessed to a green sleigh. He drove around once, twice, thrice, and looked

at the people as he passed them by. His horses ran faster than two weeks before. It seemed to the people that they had never seen horses run so fast, but not one of them dared to express his admiration. They entered the inn and drank wine, shaking their heads as they looked at one another with glass in hand, afraid to utter a single word in condemnation or in praise. Such a quarrel between the chief and his son had never been heard of before. It was clear that one of them was too many.

After Matheas had stabled his horses, his father appeared with his sleigh. The week before his performance had been cheered wildly, but there was no one who dared to show his enthusiasm that Sunday, for Matheas Bart was looking on. The old man was quick to notice the change. So! They were afraid now of the other one, of his son! The following day he ordered every one to perform some work for the community. What Janosh wanted was to see whether his command was still absolute. His men were only too glad to see him exercise his strength, his authority. They were anxious to have the fight for supremacy settled. There was a different feeling now in his people in the condition of suspense. They were afraid of one another. They ceased talking among themselves, and were anticipating with dread the approach of Sunday. They sensed a great calamity that was hanging over them. Laughter and joy were gone. From Sunday to Sunday the men and women worried and waited and expected. The security they had enjoyed while being ruled by one strong man hung on a thin thread. If one had said openly and loudly that Matheas's horses were better than his

father's, or vice versa, the whole thing would have come to an end. But nobody did say such a word. What a man thought had to be locked in his breast when two such men as Janosh and his son were disputing.

After the snow had melted, Math-eas appeared one Sunday on horse-back, on a freshly broken colt. He paused before the door of the inn long enough to let the people understand what he meant, then set out on the wildest ride over the soft meadow. Hardly had he returned, with the horse still panting for breath, foaming at the mouth, with the black coat covered with a white lather produced by the heat of its own body, when the chief appeared astride his horse and rode in the tracks his son's horse had left. Nobody dared say whose horse was faster, who was the better rider.

§ 3

And in Luca, Matheas's son, had also come a strong desire to rule; but it seemed that Janosh, his grandfather, was going to live forever and ever, and his own father also. Janosh and Math-eas were so absorbed in their rivalry that they forgot the existence of a third person with the selfsame passion in his breast. The people saw the appearance of a third contender for supremacy and grew even more dispirited.

It was the old man who decided one day to break the suspense. He was sixty then. "There was no use waiting much longer," he thought. Janosh had recently married a young woman, and she had taunted him about not being as strong as his son.

"Your best days are gone," Theresa told him one morning the following

winter, with a faint sneer in her voice. He looked at the woman for a long time, after which he said:

"Go to the inn. I'll be there presently."

A few minutes later he arrived in his sleigh with three fresh horses. The fact that Theresa had come to the inn before her husband and was dressed in her best and covered with all her jewels augured that something was going to happen.

The road was in excellent condition for sleigh-driving that day. A soft thickness of fresh snow had covered and flattened the ground. Instead of starting out immediately after his arrival, Janosh called to the innkeeper:

"Send for my son Matheas to come at once with his best horses. Give drinks to all meanwhile."

As if they were in the presence of some mysterious pagan god or demi-god the Hungarians uncovered their



heads and the women bowed theirs when they heard the chief's words. They drank wine and waited in silence. So it was going to end then and there. It did not much matter who won, but they needed an undisputed chief to whom all could submit.

A little while later Matheas arrived, sitting in his light sleigh. Father and son did not look at each other, but placed themselves in position for the race. The rear ends of both sleighs were brought straight in line. Without a word being spoken, it was understood that the course was to be to the "Bratesh" lake and back, a distance of about eight miles. The man who won would be chief.

The two men were just getting ready when sleigh-bells were heard in the distance. It was Luca who was arriving with his troika. Janosh and Matheas looked at him as he put his young wife down from the sleigh and jockeyed his little white horses into position. Having placed his sleigh in line with those of his father and grandfather, he sat down, reins in hand, and awaited further developments.

The people crossed themselves in awe. No one dared say a single word. The old chief took his whip in hand, Matheas took his, and Luca also got ready.

"So be it," said Janosh Bart.

"One," the innkeeper shouted, "two, three, go!"

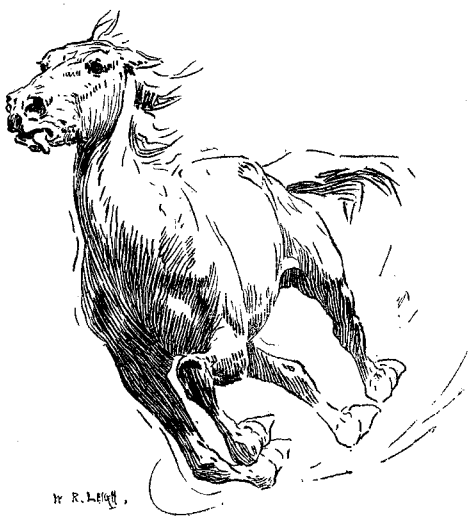
And the three generations of Barts, grandfather, son, and grandson, darted away, staking their future lives on the winning of the race.

§ 4

The whole of the flat stretch of ground was open to the eye. For a while the progress of each sleigh could be seen from in front of the inn, but as they rode farther, the three contending troikas looked more like three wriggling black snakes on the immaculate white snow.

Silently, the Hungarians watched the battle of their old chief. The

elder men were with him to a man. From time to time a man crossed himself, bent his knees, and mumbled a prayer for his favorite in the race. The



women looked suspiciously at their husbands. Surely blood was going to flow. The knives would speak when the race was over. The sleighs, now looking like dancing black specks, became smaller and smaller until they were completely lost even to the keenest eye.

"Wine! wine! wine, Innkeeper! wine!" the people shouted in chorus, unable to withstand the tension any longer. "Wine, or we burn you and your inn even as our throats are burning!"

Pitcher after pitcher was drunk, standing outside in the snow watching for the reappearance of the sleighs. After what seemed hours and hours a young boy called out:

"There they come!"

"I can see them. There! there!"

"Yes, yes; now I also see them. Like three packs of running wolves," said one of the men, and threw the pitcher away from him.

"Like three streaks of black fire," said another one, whose tongue was also loosened by the wine.

The three sleighs were returning. They crossed and hid one another from view, only to emerge again from behind a slight ridge or a snow-hill. In the stillness of the cold, sunless day one could hear the sharp rustle of whips and the muffled clang of sleigh-bells.

Janosh's black horses were the first to be clearly seen. They were in the lead.

"It 's the old man, the old man!" the innkeeper exclaimed. "Say what you will, Janosh, our old man, *is* a man. There, there, I can see his white beard; I shall give a barrel of wine if he wins."

"Who said old man?" yelled the chief's young wife. "Old man! He is younger than any of you. See him coming? He is the chief. He is Janosh—Janosh Bart, my husband!"

But the words froze on her lips, for Matheas suddenly took the lead, driving at top speed on the home stretch.

"It 's Matheas! It 's Matheas!" several voices cried, their owners looking mockingly toward Janosh's wife.

"You can't beat Matheas's horses," another man said, fingering the hilt of his knife. "He will be chief."

For a few hundred yards Matheas kept the lead. Janosh was immediately behind him. Luca kept third place in the rut of his grandfather's sleigh. The people at the inn had forgotten Luca's existence altogether, as though he were not in the race at all. But five hundred yards from the inn Luca's white horses swerved away, passed the old man, and were soon running neck and neck with Matheas's horses.

As fresh as if they had just started

the journey, Luca's white stallions stretched their legs until the stomachs were of a block with the snow. Matheas held on for a while, trying to re-



gain the ground he had lost, but Luca's young voice gave wings to his animals, and father and grandfather were left steadily behind.

"Luca! Luca!" the young man's wife called. "My Luca! Come! come! come! You promised you would win. You promised. Come! come! Luca! Luca! Luca!"

Realizing that they were losing, father and grandfather, discouraged, slowed up, and allowed Luca to win the race by a good hundred yards.

Fur caps flew in the air, and the men and women shouted to one another. Luca was surrounded and hugged and kissed. His wife threw herself on him and cried hysterically. But sober, cool, and collected, the young man pushed them all aside and posed, whip in hand, in front of the inn. He was the chief now. Slowly, grandfather and father passed by, with bowed heads, before the victorious boy.

"Give drinks to my men, Innkeeper," Luca ordered as he took the reins in hand again and helped his wife into his sleigh. It was only then that the Hungarians fully realized what had really happened.

"So it's Luca! Luca! Luca!" they yelled and sang.

"Luca! Luca!" They cried, and kissed one another, free again under an undisputed master.

"Where are the Tziganes? We want music, song; we have a new chief. And he will rule like a man, with an iron hand," they assured one another, solemnly, drinking and dancing. That night three farms of the neighborhood went up in flames to settle an old score which had remained in abeyance while Janosh was fighting for supremacy.

The following day Matheas Bart tore down the fence between his field and that of his father.

"What say you, Matheas Bart, about the new chief?" a passer-by asked.

"That he is my son," answered Matheas with dignity.

"And also my grandson," said Janosh Bart, the old chief, who had come out to watch his son at work. And for the first time in many long years father and son shook hands.

"We are old men now, both of us. He is a young lion, a young lion," Janosh Bart assured his son.

"I was the son of chief; now I am the father of one," Matheas cried. "You have lived too long, Janosh Bart."

